UNITED NATIONS

World Chronicle

PROGRAMME: No. 664, recorded 18 March 1997

GUEST: **Angela V.E. KING**
Special Adviser to the United Nations Secretary-General on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women

JOURNALISTS: Judy Lessing, Radio New Zealand
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ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

Angela V. E. KING, Special Adviser to the United Nations Secretary-General on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, reflects on the situation of women inside the world organization as well in the world in general. United Nations reform is a continuous process, and more women will be appointed to reach gender parity. Women have served in high peace-keeping positions in many parts of the world and have demonstrated that they function as well as men. United Nations conferences on women have created a partnership between Governments, grass-root organizations and the United Nations system to promote the advancement of women. Ms. King believes that discrimination against women in third world countries is the result of poverty and traditional practices.

WORLD CHRONICLE is produced by the Media Division, Department of Public Information, United Nations, New York, NY 10017, U.S.A.

Duration: 28:01"
Executive Producer: Kamil Taha
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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Fifty years ago, recognizing the importance of equality between men and women, the United Nations established the Commission on the Status of Women. Since then, the world community has convened a number of international conferences devoted to the advancement of women. Yet, discrimination against women in education, employment, ownership and decision-making is still widespread in many parts of the world, especially in the third world countries. Why have women not been able to realise their full and equal rights? And what can be done to improve this unfair situation?

Our guest today is concerned with women's issues in general and in the United Nations system in particular. She is Angela King, Special Adviser to the United Nations Secretary-General on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women. Joining me to talk with Ms. King are Judy Lessing of Radio New Zealand and Sebnem Senyener of *Sabah* of Istanbul.

Ms. King, welcome to World Chronicle.

Ms. King, Ms. Assistant Secretary-General, I hate to begin the programme on a somewhat negative note, but when the Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, announced his first top level appointments, there was considerable disappointment among the staff men and women, but especially women, that among I think about 18 top level under-secretaries-general and assistant secretaries-general there were only two women, namely yourself and Gillian Martin Sorensen, she for External Relations, and you for Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women. As the Secretary-General's adviser, and I understand reporting directly to the Secretary-General, not at some intermediate level, what are you advising him for the future?

KING: Well, I am certainly advising him to appoint more high level women and senior women. And we are taking very practical measures to ensure that there is a good pool of women candidates with a variety of skills that at any short notice can be called upon as a special envoy or for a good offices mission. For this we also have very good support from the seven women permanent representatives, the G-7, as they are called, and they have also submitted lists. In fact, I think the 38th floor is flooded with lists — from NGOs, civil society, from Governments — of women, and they are being sorted out.

I think it is also correct to say that the Secretary-General pointed out that his reform would be a measured one, it would be a process and not an event, and I don't think he was trying to score brownie points by appointing a lot of women at the beginning and then having the reform follow their appointments, and perhaps the two not particularly meshing. So I

think he doesn't want to be rushed. As you have seen, he made a second announcement yesterday, and that will be —

LITTLEJOHNS: He said, I believe, "Judge me not on my first few weeks, but on what will happen in the next few months."

KING: Yes, yes. And if you're looking at statistics, the two women that he did announce, together with Elizabeth Dowdeswell of UNEP, the three women —

LITTLEJOHNS: United Nations Environment Programme.

KING: Environment Programme, yes, it's 50 per cent more women at that level than we had last year. So.

LITTLEJOHNS: Is that so?

KING: That is correct.

LITTLEJOHNS: But you mentioned seven permanent representatives who are women. That's a terrible record. There are 185 Member States. Only seven, only seven women?

KING: That's correct. We are down one because —

LITTLEJOHNS: Madeleine Albright is now the Secretary of State.

KING: Precisely. Precisely.

LESSING: But you're — sorry.

KING: I just wanted to mention that three of them are — they're clustered in regions. Three are from central and western Asia — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, and two from the Caribbean — Trinidad and Tobago, and Jamaica — which we find quite interesting.

LESSING: Just talking about the G-7, not to be confused with the other G-7 —

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean the [Group of] Seven industrialized countries?

LESSING: Right, you see, we have to think of their —

LITTLEJOHNS: Are you referring to them, or are you referring to this usage?

LESSING: Well, I'm thinking about the G-7 that Ms. King has been talking about, the GW-7, shall we say. I was interested because I met some of them the other day, and they were talking exactly as you have been about the need not just to say we need more women in high level jobs, you can say that, but they're also being quite practical and bringing lists forward. You really do need a nice big pool before you get the cream of the crop, don't you? So how is that process going?

KING: Well, it is moving along. I think there has been a lot of openness. The Secretary-General himself has seen personally several groups that have expressed the wish that he do something. I think this is the first Secretary-General who has actually said, if I do get the post of deputy-secretary-general, I am quite prepared to appoint a woman, and I think we have never had that before. So the atmosphere, the enabling environment that we talk about is

certainly there. Of course, it remains to be seen how it works out in practice. And that's part of my role, to ensure that, you know, there is a little accountability and monitoring and constant advice and making the system aware of what heads have to do. Women have to be involved themselves in more risk-taking and so on. It's not a single process.

SENYENER: I'm quite curious, actually, I want to find out something, because you're right in there in that process observing it from firsthand. And we're talking about reform at the United Nations. So I'm curious to find out why there weren't more women appointed at this particular time, why there is only a 50 per cent increase, like with two more women now. How do you see it? Why actually it doesn't happen? It's not because there's no list, or is it the awareness of the people up there on the 38th floor? What is it? What does stop more women being appointed on these jobs?

KING: Well, I think part of the reason is that the reform process is an ongoing one. The real full two track, or the second part of the reform is not going to be announced until July. As you know, the Secretary-General has appointed Mr. Maurice Strong as his reform czar, and he's having discussions on a wide variety of levels on the question of reform. And I think it was just a very practical point of view — would you appoint someone before you really have the portfolio set? The portfolios are being set. Yesterday we heard an announcement that three very large departments in the economic and social areas would be amalgamated, but the actual breakdown and details of that have not been publicized yet. It's still being worked on. So I think part of it is among the men who were announced there weren't that many new faces either. And I think it is all part of the process. Let us continue as we are for the moment until we see our reform package, and then we will take additional steps where necessary.

SENYENER: Yes, because I'm curious to understand if the 38th floor is aware of the fact that the Organization itself, which says things to the world, cannot do these things in itself, first of all, cannot deliver its message. I don't know, I mean, the woman case, for example, gives me questionable ideas about that, and how are you confident about it?

KING: As Mr. Littlejohns said, you know, we have been in a process 50 years, it's not going to be solved overnight. We're just at the beginning of a new five-year period where there's —

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean the new Secretary-General.

KING: Yes. Yes. Yes. And an administration. And he can set the pace to a certain extent, and his cabinet to a certain extent. But it also invariably rests with Member States. There are certain issues, for example, where I know that we have asked for women from certain countries, you know, for women candidates, and the same countries that are being very vociferous in certain committees about more women are the ones also putting forward only

male candidates. So I think you have to see it in balance, that, you know, it will come, but let's wait for July and towards the end of the year, and then let's have our first....

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. King, you've spoken about the reforms that are underway, or will be underway, and of course reform seems to be the flavour of the month, as they say, and perhaps the flavour of the next five years. But how high a priority does gender parity have in the reform process?

KING: I think it has a high priority. In the first instance, you know, there are four executive committees that have been set up in the new management processes — a policy coordination group, and then there are these four committees. I have access with the Secretary-General's backing to these four committees to talk about gender mainstreaming. Mainstreaming was the sort of *leit motif* that came out of Beijing. It's much beyond —

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean the Women's Conference in Beijing.

KING: Yes, the Women's Conference in Beijing. That is to have a gender perspective in all the programmes and policies of the UN, and with the Governments and so on. And we have made some progress in the social areas and some economic areas, although we still have some of our major publications coming out with sex-disaggregated statistics, but no real gender perspective or gender analysis of issues such as poverty and so on, so I think that a lot needs to be done there. And this is an opening in those four committees, one on Peace and Security, one on Humanitarian Affairs, another on Development Operations, and the fourth on Economic and Social [Affairs].

LESSING: Ms. King, just to pick up on peace, you were the leader of the UN group in South Africa, which I'm going to call the peace-keeping mission, and it seems to have been a highly successful mission. And it had a large number of women in it as well as yourself. How — is that a very good example for the UN to look to when it sets up other peace-keeping missions, and involving women — not just grassroots women in the country, but actual peace-keepers, women, going into countries?

KING: I would say emphatically yes. I would also say that, in the UN terminology, South Africa was not actually described as peace-keeping but as peace-building and preventive diplomacy, it was more on that scale. But it was a little bit of all of them, because there was a lot of conflict resolution and so on. Where we found that South Africa and Namibia were particularly powerful was not —

LITTLEJOHNS: In Namibia, there was 60 per cent women, I read.

KING: Exactly. It was not just because women were there, but that women had leadership positions. In South Africa, half of the team leaders for the build-up to the big elections were women. And they were not just in the peaceful, so-called peaceful or safe areas, they were actually at the forefront. In fact, the three most dangerous areas — in Natal,

Kwazulu; the Johannesburg area; and at one point the Orange Free State — were all headed by women. So there was the example, and we felt that having women out there did have a calming effect on the populace, a reassurance, as well as the fact that, you know, the UN and the international community really wanted it to work. And it had a tremendous reaction effect from the women of South Africa, who also played a tremendous role with the men of South Africa.

LITTLEJOHNS: Did you feel that the Observer Mission that you headed in South Africa was a dangerous mission? In a speech you made the other day, I noticed that you said that there was a rape in Johannesburg every 83 seconds. I mean, were any of your women involved in acts of violence, I mean, the victims of acts of violence?

KING: Not rape, I'm happy to say. But we had very good briefing from our counterparts in South Africa, and also we oriented ourselves. We had very good briefings for new arrivals. I mean, simple things, like don't wear jewellery, don't wear tight pants, things like that, that probably in New York you wouldn't think of in a briefing for a political mission that it was that important, but it became highly important there. We did have some women who were involved in dangerous incidents — stone-throwing, bullets. We have been under tracer bullets. Many of us had to wear bullet-proof vests underneath our clothes, because we did not want to unduly alarm those around us. But it was issued by the UN and we did wear them. We had no helmets, of course.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Angela King, Special Adviser to the United Nations Secretary-General on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women.

SENYENER: So I think Michael's question also implies in these missions how the woman does, and is there a special issue that we have to care about, because the people involved in these cases are women. Which reminds me of the opinion in general about women's involvement in a lot of things. And the activities of women by increasing bring a lot of issues back in terms of the issues, agendas of the organizations, women's organizations. So could you give us some good news of the work of these organizations in issues such as war crimes against women, of reproductive rights of women, and all other women's issues, women in economics, political rights of women and political representation, all these issues that we still have to face all over the world, and what are the recent good news on them?

KING: Well, one of the results of the Beijing Conference — and I take it that your question is focused on the civil society and the women's organizations of civil society and NGOs — one of the really great things coming out of Beijing was the fact that it energized not just Governments but this whole partnership mode between Governments and real actors in society, whether it's in Istanbul with the mayors and the civics or certainly in Beijing the women, the grassroots women, and the women of the NGO communities. They have taken up

a number of issues: for example, with the women in — the situation of women in Afghanistan; they have taken up questions of mutilation, genital mutilation. On the question of reproductive rights, we do have an NGO that has spearheaded conferences amongst the Commonwealth countries about exactly how do you look at reproductive rights, what are measurements. You look at the budgets and you see exactly what, as an indicator, which has been very effective. This in turn has really sparked off the UN system to take a number of cooperative actions that perhaps we would not have thought of doing before. As you know, there are six treaty bodies under the human rights conventions, including the one on the elimination of discrimination against women, and the first time that they elected to meet together as treaty bodies was on the agenda issue of reproductive rights, and it was organized jointly by the UNFPA, the United Nations Fund for Population —

LITTLEJOHNS: The United Nations Population Fund.

KING: — also the Division for the Advancement of Women and the Centre for Human Rights. It was considered really a breakthrough. This happened late last year in December, and was very effective. And we were trying to get the people on the treaty bodies to look, have a sort of synoptic view of what it was to have gender in rights, not just a question of racism or economic rights or political rights, but across the board what it would mean if you're looking at his rights, reproductive rights, and so on.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. King, we spoke in the introduction about discrimination against women, particularly in third world countries. What can you do, what can the UN do, to redress that situation?

KING: I would have to start by saying that there are varieties of discrimination. The largest part of discrimination in third world countries comes from poverty and the situation globally. But there are certain aspects of the situation of women's rights in third world countries that are actually better than some of the so-called countries of the North. I think that what the UN system is doing is through technical assistance, through the UNDP programme of resident coordinators, the UNFPA programme and so on. We have been, through the mainstreaming, actually, through this Inter-Agency Committee on Women and Gender Equality, looking very carefully at mainstreaming, and the operational units, like UNIFEM, UNDP and so on —

LITTLEJOHNS: That's the UN's —

KING: The Voluntary Fund, the UN Voluntary Fund for Women. Sorry I keep using these acronyms! Have been sending out guidelines which have been used on the ground by the agencies. And we are getting feedback now on how effective they are or what are their problems. For example, one of the problems we found in our brainstorming meeting in February was that there's a tendency to have the gender focal points have the entire focus, and

the whole emphasis — the burden is on them. But this has now been exploded, and we realize that everybody has to be responsible, from the top of UNDP or the top of UNIFEM or the top of my division down, and up. It works both ways. And there are very practical guidelines for how to implement it, how to interact with Governments to persuade them to have this new view of the issue. So there is that kind of assistance, and there is funding. For example, the UNIFEM, the Fund for Women, has this trust fund for violence against women, and countries can go with projects to get assistance there.

So there are a variety of ways that we are looking at, but to come back to the other question, the third world, in certain instances — like political decision-making and women in parliaments — has far outpaced countries such as France, with, say, only 6.7 per cent in parliament, USA, 10.7. You have South Africa with 25 per cent; Seychelles, 29 per cent, and so on.

LITTLEJOHNS: In the Arab countries it's only 3.3, I think.

KING: That's true. But I think there are situations where women in the third world, because perhaps of their provision, because perhaps they are seeking to solve problems of poverty for themselves and their families, have gathered together and joined forces to, say, preserve the environment. And so you have movements in Kenya and so on that are really extremely valuable to the society as a whole.

LESSING: I'd like, if I could, to go back to look at peace-keeping, peace-making, that whole area, and wonder, there hasn't been a woman as special representative of the Secretary-General ever, as far as I'm aware, there may be one —

KING: Ms. Anstee.

LESSING: Oh, Ms. Anstee, I'm sorry, in Angola. But, you know, that's one, that's a one off, and it's not enough. Is one of the problems, or has one of the problems in the past been that this organization has been run by men and they tend to see political leaders at the top of a group in a country as being men, either military people or civilians, and they think they have to send one of the boys to talk to the boys?

KING: I think this is absolutely correct.

LESSING: So how, what — you know, how do you approach that? How do you approach it and say, give us a chance to show that we can do it too?

KING: Well, I think that the previous Secretary-General, Dr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, took risk-taking, extreme risk-taking on both Ms. Anstee and myself, and he just did it, because of a variety of very complex issues in the Angola situation. There were many other factors at play other than female-male, as Ms. Anstee very graphically said in that meeting. In South Africa, perhaps there were other factors. But sometimes you just have to do it. In the good old days in UNDP, Ms. Anstee's fond of saying, you know, there couldn't be a resident

coordinator who was a woman, because certain countries in Latin America or in the Middle East just wouldn't accept it, until she went, and others went, and there was not a problem. We heard exactly the same thing when, at one point, we were trying to have special measures to get DPI to target, say, UNICs, for having a percentage of UNICs, UN Information Centres, headed by women, and we were told, oh, no, those countries would not accept. And in fact the same countries did accept, and the women did extremely well, and I think we have to give credit to some of the leadership in DPI for taking the risk on that one.

LITTLEJOHNS: Sebnem?

SENYENER: The other question related to these relationships with the Governments, Islam is also bringing a serious challenge in terms of women's issues again. Time to time that comes back. And how does your attitude towards it and how do you think it should be handled?

KING: Well, Islam is — I think you would probably know better than I, coming from Turkey — also very diverse, and there are many points of view. We have had meetings on women in Islam, either by civil society — sisterhood is global — that have shown the vast variety of views, and where we come across issues where certain countries have to — well, let's say our problems, for example, in ratifying the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. And most of the countries from Islam have had reservations, but some of the reservations are rather slight, and others are more extensive, but they have ratified. And we try and go to countries where the Sharia has not been so much of a problem, where the civil law has also had equal partnership, like Tunisia, get experts from them, get to know the ways that they have of bringing women into the forefront, which Tunisia certainly has not a problem, and many of the other North African countries, and exchange views among countries in a non-threatening, you know, non-patronizing, non-maternalistic type of way. That's how we have to —

SENYENER: Deal with it. Yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. King, it seems to me that you have tremendous obstacles to overcome in the area of culture and religion, but especially culture. One doesn't want to bring the religious question up too much, but cultures, I mean, you mentioned earlier on about the problem of female genital mutilation. Well, this is a cultural thing, I believe. And 2 million girls have to go through this barbaric procedure every year because of cultural practice. I mean, the UN can't do anything about that, surely.

KING: Well, the UN is doing something about it. Actually, the Centre for Human Rights has a special rapporteur who is working on certain issues, or violence against women. She has been working for three years, Mrs. Radhika Coomaraswamy. She regularly reports to the Commission on the Status of Women and other key commissions. And basically through

her reports, through her constantly raising the level of attention on these issues, I think that there is a move. I mean, recently, as a result I think of Beijing and all the discussion over this issue, Egypt has banned it, and it's been banned in two North American countries, as you know — Canada and the US. This may be a small beginning, but I think it is a beginning and we should not not feel optimistic about it.

LITTLEJOHNS: Not feel pessimistic about it, you mean?

KING: No. Not be pessimistic.

LITTLEJOHNS: We should feel optimistic about it!

KING: We should, yes!

LITTLEJOHNS: Let's hope your optimism is justified. Ms. King, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**. I guess we could have gone on at much greater length, but we're out of time.

Our guest has been Angela King, Special Adviser to the United Nations Secretary-General on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women. She was interviewed by Judy Lessing of Radio New Zealand and Sebnem Senyener of *Sabah* of Istanbul.
I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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